

## Pictorial Representation and Abstract Pictures

There is a debate on pictorial representation in analytical aesthetics. Since the publication of Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1961) – a highly influential work in the history of art – accounts of what it means to pictorially represent have flourished<sup>1</sup>. In a nutshell, philosophical interest about pictorial representation is grounded in the fact that the traditional view – the so-called ‘resemblance view’ - according to which pictures represent by means of sharing visual resemblances with the objects they represent, is open to a variety of criticisms, as Gombrich firstly pointed out<sup>2</sup>. His work, as well as subsequent studies on pictorial representation, focuses on figurative pictures, because of the puzzlement that arises from the fact that, although we have strong intuitions that figurative pictures resemble the objects they depict, it is difficult to offer a sound explanation that accounts for such intuitions. It is often (implicitly) assumed that pictorial representation is equal to figurative representation, given that it seems highly disputable that we have analogous intuitions about the content of non-figurative pictures. However, there are borderline cases, where the same picture can be considered both figurative and non-figurative: analytical cubism provides a variety of examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Key references are: Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1961); Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968); Flint Schier *Deeper into Pictures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986); Christopher Peacocke, ‘Depiction’, *Philosophical Review* 96 (1987), pp. 383- 410; Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987); John Hyman, *The Imitation of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell 1989); Malcom Budd, ‘How Pictures Look’, in Knowles and Skorupski, *Virtue and Taste* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), pp. 154-75; Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996); Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998); Dominic Lopes *Sight and Sensibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2005); John Kulvicki *On Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006); John Hyman *The Objective Eye* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The first formulation of the resemblance theory is in Plato's *Cratylus*. For Gombrich's criticisms against the resemblance theory see *Art and Illusion*, chapters 1-4. For a summary of the main criticisms that have been addressed against the resemblance theory see Hyman, *The Objective Eye*, pp. 62-72.

Unfortunately, philosophical literature on depiction has not dedicated much attention to non-figurative art. Moreover, when ‘abstract’ pictures are taken into account, a distinction is traced between those pictures which still share some aspect with figurative ones, and can therefore be said to represent, and those, which cannot be said to pictorially represent, because they don’t have anything in common with figurative ones. This is evidence for the claim that figurative pictures are considered the paradigm of pictorial representation. Is this focus appropriate? Are there sound arguments to support it? In this paper, I want to challenge the shared view that not all pictures can be said to pictorially represent. I shall criticize the two main arguments, which are adduced to exclude certain images from the domain of pictorial representation, and sketch an alternative account of pictorial representation, which encompasses both so called ‘figurative’ and ‘non-figurative’ – or ‘abstract’ - images.

The first argument I want to challenge has been put forward by Richard Wollheim<sup>3</sup>. It can be summarized as follows:

(P1): for a picture to be a pictorial representation, the experience it elicits in a standard observer must include a sense of depth, which has to occur while the observer is looking at the marked surface of the picture;

(P2): several non-figurative pictures elicit such an experience in the viewers who focus their attention on the pictorial surface of such pictures;

(C): it follows that such non-figurative pictures meet the requirements for pictorial representation.

The kernel of my criticisms to Wollheim lies in the claim that it is

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<sup>3</sup> Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p.48 (ff.).

possible to find counterexamples undermining (P1). What about a picture of the starry sky? We may encounter no difficulty in recognizing that it depicts stars and a dark-blue sky, but nevertheless we would not perceive any sense of *depth in the depicted scene* simply by means of looking at it. It seems, then, that there are figurative pictures that do not evoke any sense of depth, and it is hard to say that such pictures do not represent. As a consequence, evocation of depth is not a reliable criterion for excluding certain abstract pictures from the realm of pictorial representation.

The second argument I want to challenge has been put forward by Dominic Lopes in *Understanding Pictures* (1996). To grasp Lopes' proposal it is first of all necessary to mention the terminological distinction he traces among the following three terms. 1) A picture's *subject* is 'the real-world entities a picture represents' (e.g. Monna Lisa is the subject of Leonardo's *La Gioconda*); 2) a picture's *designs* are 'a privileged set of visual properties, those by means of which pictures represent their subjects'; 3) a picture's *content* is given by the properties the picture 'represents the world as having' (3-4). Lopes argues that 'pictures' designs [do not] resemble their contents in any uniform way' and proposes instead that 'pictures' designs present recognizable aspects of things' (4). The recognized aspects are visual aspects of the pictures' subjects and they are visually recognized while looking at pictures. According to Lopes, the fact that it allows for content and subject recognition is the defining feature of pictorial representation: pictures are essentially 'visual prostheses' (144) that 'embody information enabling viewers to recognize their contents and their subjects' (149). It follows that, according to Lopes, non-figurative abstract pictures cannot be said to pictorially represent, because there is pictorial

representation if and only if there is recognition of aspects of pictures' subjects and abstract pictures do not have subjects..

According to Lopes, for our understanding of pictorial representation it is crucial that we do not identify a picture's subject with a picture's content, while this is precisely what the resemblance theory of pictorial representation does: 'a genuine resemblance theory of depiction...holds that a picture has a content as of its subject because its design resembles its subject' (4). Against the resemblance theory Lopes argues that, rather than understanding pictures by noticing resemblances between designs and pictures' subjects, 'we notice resemblances as a result of understanding pictures' (17), i.e. as a result of recognizing visual aspects of pictures' subjects while looking at the pictures.

For my argument's sake it is not necessary to go into the details of Lopes' account of pictorial recognition. Moreover, my criticism of Lopes' view is not directed towards the recognitional account of pictorial representation itself. Rather, it is directed towards Lopes' conception of the resemblance view, which motivates his rejection of it. I compare Lopes' conception of the resemblance theory of depiction with the conception outlined by John Hyman in *The Objective Eye* (2006). I argue that Hyman offers a more basic account of pictorial representation, which allows for keeping Lopes' proposal, while limiting its application to the explanation of a less basic level of pictorial representation. Finally, I argue that abstract pictures should be said to pictorially represent at the basic level described by Hyman.